

Reformation 500

Christ Alone

1 Peter 3:18

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Scripture

During this fall, we are focusing our attention on the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation began when an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther nailed *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. His propositions sparked a debate that eventually gave us five key Reformation doctrines, and are usually referred to by their Latin names: *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), and *solī deo Gloria* (glory to God alone). Today, I would like to examine Christ alone.

Let's read 1 Peter 3:18:

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.... (1 Peter 3:18)

Introduction

In his book titled *Christ Alone—the Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior: What the Reformers Taught...and Why It Still Matters*, Stephen Wellum writes:

Reformation theology is often summarized by the five *solas*. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) stands as the formal principle of the Reformation and the foundation of all theology. God's glory alone (*solī Deo gloria*) functions as a capstone for all Reformation theology, connecting its various parts to God's one purpose for creating this world and humanity in it. In between these two *solas*, the other three emphasize that God has chosen and acted to save us by his sovereign grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), which is grounded in and through Christ alone (*solus*

Christus).¹

All the *solas* are interrelated. They are connected to each other, and you cannot have one without the others. However, *solus Christus* stands at the center of the other four *solas*. J. I. Packer said, “Christology is the true hub round which the wheel of theology revolves, and to which its separate spokes must each be correctly anchored if the wheel is not to get bent.”² And theologian Michael Reeves said that “the center, the cornerstone, the jewel in the crown of Christianity is not an idea, a system or a thing; it is not even ‘the gospel’ as such. It is Jesus Christ.”³

The Reformers restated the exclusive identity of Christ and the sufficiency of his work. James Montgomery Boice writes:

Justification because of Christ alone (*solus Christus*) means that Jesus has done the necessary work of salvation utterly and completely, so that no merit on the part of man, no merit of the saints, no works of ours performed either here or later in purgatory, can add to his completed work. In fact, any attempt to add to Christ’s work is a perversion of the gospel and indeed is no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-9). To proclaim Christ alone is to proclaim him as the Christian’s one and only sufficient Prophet, Priest, and King. We need no other prophets to reveal God’s word or will. We need no other priests to mediate God’s salvation and blessing. We need no other kings to control the thinking and lives of believers. Jesus is everything to us and for us in the gospel.⁴

At the center of Christ’s work of salvation is the cross of Christ. Again, notice what Boice writes:

¹ Stephen Wellum and Matthew Barrett, *Christ Alone—the Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior: What the Reformers Taught...and Why It Still Matters*, The 5 Solas Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 19.

² J. I. Packer, “Jesus Christ the Lord,” in *The J. I. Packer Collection*, comp. Alister McGrath (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 151.

³ Michael Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 10.

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?: Rediscovering the Doctrines that Shook the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 88.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Christ's Cross. For whether we are thinking about the necessity of the Cross, the meaning of the Cross, the preaching of the Cross, the offense of the Cross, or the way of the Cross—however we may think about it—in every case we are saying, and must be saying, is that the Cross is central to Christianity. Indeed, we are saying more. We are saying that without the Cross of Jesus Christ there is no true Christianity at all.⁵

Boice suggests that the way to look at the cross of Jesus Christ is by examining three important words.

Lesson

We shall examine three words that are important to understand what the cross is about.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Cross as Satisfaction
2. The Cross as Sacrifice
3. The Cross as Substitution

I. The Cross as Satisfaction

First, let's look at the cross as satisfaction.

God created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden. Then, God created Eve to be a helper fit for Adam. Sadly, they eventually rebelled against God by disobeying his command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And from that time on all human beings—with the exception of Jesus Christ—have broken God's commandments. Moreover, instead of people evolving into greater obedience to God, people have instead devolved into greater disobedience to God. So, the Apostle Paul

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 89.

wrote in Romans 1:18, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”

God is rightly wrathful at the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. His holy Law has been—and continues to be—broken by our sin.

Satisfaction, then, has to do with the character of God, whom we have offended. Our sin has offended the holy God. Satisfaction means “to make reparation for damage done, to make amends, or to provide compensation. In this case the damage is to God’s law and honor.”⁶ The cross is the means by which satisfaction is made to God.

Sinful people are unable to achieve salvation by themselves. We have rebelled against God and broken his law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. Worse yet, is that one of the effects of sin is that even our wills are bound. Therefore, we are incapable of even choosing to obey God.

Out of his great love, God sent his Son Jesus Christ to make satisfaction for the damage done to his law and honor by our sin. Martin Luther expressed the concept of satisfaction as follows:

Since all of us, born in sin and God’s enemies, have earned nothing but eternal wrath and hell so that everything we are and can do is damned, and there is no help or way of getting out of this predicament...therefore another man had to step into our place, namely Jesus Christ, God and man, and had to render satisfaction and make payment for sin through his suffering and death.⁷

And how did Jesus do so? Well, several Bible verses testify to Jesus rendering satisfaction to God and making payment for sin

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 93.

⁷ Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, comp. Ewald M. Plass (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959), vol. 3, 1423.

through his suffering death. Let me list a few of them for you:

- Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- Galatians 3:13a: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.”
- 1 Peter 1:18–19: “...knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”
- Revelation 5:9–10: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”

II. The Cross as Sacrifice

Second, let’s look at the cross as sacrifice.

Satisfaction had to do with making reparation for the damage done to God’s law and honor. Sacrifice has to do with satisfying God’s wrath. God is personally offended by our sin. He is righteously angry, and his wrath must be addressed if we are to be reconciled to him.

The biblical word which captures this truth is *propitiation*. The Greek word (*hilasmos*) refers to the means of appeasing wrath and gaining the good will of an offended person; especially with respect to sacrifices for appeasing angered deities. In the ancient world, propitiation referred to what a worshipper did when he or she presented a sacrifice to one of the gods or goddesses.

Propitiation occurs in two places in the New Testament:

- 1 John 2:2: “He [Christ] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”
- 1 John 4:10: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

God is rightly angry with all people because of our sins. His wrath must be appeased. Boice notes that “although God’s wrath is not like the capricious anger of the pagan deities, his wrath is nevertheless a true wrath against sin; and it is this true and proper wrath that must be dealt with.”⁸ Far too many people in our day think that God is only a God of love. Even to mention the wrath of God seems incompatible with their understanding of the character of God. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding, I believe, is due to the fact that we too often teach our children only about the love of God and not about his wrath. The fact is that God is both a God of love and also a God of wrath. The very same chapter of the Bible that speaks of the love of God—John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”—also speaks about the wrath of God—John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

Furthermore, as Boice notes, “although propitiation means turning God’s wrath aside, in the Bible this is never a case of human beings appeasing God’s wrath but rather of God himself satisfying his wrath through the death of his own Son, Jesus Christ.”⁹ Non-Christians seek to appease the wrath of their gods by their

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 98.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace?*, 98.

own sacrifices. But in the Bible it is God himself who provides a sufficient sacrifice to appease his wrath, and that sacrifice is the blood of his own son.

But what about the blood sacrifices of all the animals by God's people in the Old Testament? These sacrifices prefigured and pointed to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. God graciously placated his own wrath against sin so that his love may go out to save sinners. John Stott says, "This was already clear in the Old Testament, in which the sacrifices were recognized not as human works but as divine gifts. They did not make God gracious; they were provided by a gracious God in order that he might act graciously towards his sinful people. 'I have given it to you,' God said of the sacrificial blood, 'to make atonement for yourselves on the altar' (Leviticus 17:11)."¹⁰ So, even the blood required by God in the Old Testament was provided by himself so that his people could appease his wrath.

III. The Cross as Substitution

And third, let's look at the cross as substitution.

Substitution means quite simply, "replacing one person or thing for another."¹¹ God provided a substitute through a mediator. A mediator is one who comes between two parties in order to represent each to the other in order to reconcile them. This is precisely what we need in order to be reconciled to God. We need someone to come between God and ourselves in order to represent God to us and us to God in order to reconcile us to God. Jesus is the Mediator whom God sent in order to fulfill this role.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "For our sake [God] made him [i.e., Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God accepted Jesus as our substitute.

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 173-174.

¹¹ Thomas Nelson Publishers, *Nelson's Quick Reference Topical Bible Index*, Nelson's Quick Reference (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 596.

Jesus bore the punishment for sin in our place. The scholarly Scotsman William Barclay shared the story of a missionary who went to an Indian village to tell the story of Jesus. Following his talk, the Christian showed slide presentations of Jesus, using a whitewashed wall for the screen. When the picture of Christ on the cross appeared, a man sprang to his feet exclaiming, “Come down from that cross, Son of God. I, not You, should be hanging there!”¹²

Horatio G. Spafford also understood the truth about Jesus serving as a substitute for our sin, when he wrote:

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!—
My sin, not in part, but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!¹³

Jesus has not only borne the punishment for our sin, but he has also credited his righteousness to our account. When Abraham trusted God, Genesis 15:6, “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” The truth about Jesus’ righteousness being credited to us is beautifully captured by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf:

Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.¹⁴

It is because of this double transaction that we, who are sinners, are able to stand forgiven before God and clothed in the

¹² G. Curtis Jones, *1000 Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1986), 93.

¹³ *Logos Hymnal*, 1st edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).

¹⁴ Paul Eckert, *Steve Green’s MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1998).

righteousness of Jesus.

Conclusion

Therefore, having examined three important words to understand what the cross of Christ is about, we should believe that Christ's work on the cross is sufficient for salvation.

Here is H. E. Guillebaud's summary of the three important truths of Christ's work on the cross:

God is not only perfectly holy, but the source and pattern of holiness. He is the origin and the upholder of the moral order of the universe. He *must* be just. The Judge of all the earth *must* do right. Therefore it was impossible by the necessities of his own being that he should deal lightly with sin, and compromise the claims of holiness. If sin could be forgiven at all, it must be on some basis which would vindicate the holy law of God, which is not a mere code, but the moral order of the whole creation. But such vindication must be supremely costly. Costly to whom? Not to the forgiven sinner, for there could be no price asked from him for his forgiveness; both because the cost is far beyond his reach, and because God loves to give and not to sell. Therefore, God himself undertook to pay a cost, to offer a sacrifice, so tremendous that the gravity of his condemnation of sin should be absolutely beyond question even as he forgave it, while at the same time the love which impelled him to pay the price would be the wonder of the angels, and would call forth the worshiping gratitude of the redeemed sinner.

On Calvary this price was paid, paid by God: the Son giving himself, bearing our sin and its curse; the Father giving the Son, his only Son whom he loved. But it was paid by God become man, who not only took the place of guilty man, but also was his representative....

He offered himself as a sacrifice in our stead, bearing our sin in his own body on the tree. He suffered, not only awful physical anguish, but also the unthinkable spiritual horror of becoming identified with the sin to which he was infinitely opposed. He

thereby came under the curse of sin, so that for a time even his perfect fellowship with his Father was broken. Thus God proclaimed his infinite abhorrence of sin by being willing himself to suffer all that, in place of the guilty ones, in order that he might justly forgive. Thus the love of God found its perfect fulfillment, because he did not hold back from even that uttermost sacrifice, in order that we might be saved from eternal death through what he endured.¹⁵

Let me close with two conclusions.

First, the cross and not Christmas is the central point of Christianity. As important as Jesus' birth is, it has no meaning apart from the crucifixion of Christ. J. I. Packer rightly notes, "The crucial significance of the cradle at Bethlehem lies in its place in the sequence of steps down that led the Son of God to the cross of Calvary, and we do not understand it until we see it in that context."¹⁶

And second, there is no gospel without the cross. By itself, God's love for sinners is not the gospel. Christmas is not the gospel. The life of Jesus is not the gospel. Even the resurrection of Jesus by itself is not the gospel. The good news is that God became a man, lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, was buried, and then three days later was raised back to life again.

Simply put, Christ alone must connect all the truths of our theology because Christ alone stands as the cornerstone of all that God has done to reconcile sinners to himself. If we misunderstand who Christ is, and what he has done by his life, death, and resurrection, then we will misunderstand other doctrines too.

May God help us to grow in our understanding of who Christ is and what he has done for sinners such as ourselves. Amen.

¹⁵ H. E. Guillebaud, *Why the Cross?* (Chicago: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1947), 130, 135.

¹⁶ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 51.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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